

Networking NGOs and Action Group Movement :

Most non-governmental organisations (NGOs) functioning in India since independence have been charity and relief oriented groups engaged in running educational institutions, hospitals, orphanages, homes for aged, etc. These charity organisations are mostly founded under religious inspiration as all religions encourage and promote charity assistance to the poor and needy. The evolution of voluntary agencies based on developmental activities is a phenomenon that started taking shape in late sixties, picking up momentum in seventies and becoming a parallel nationwide political movement since eighties. The proliferation of these voluntary groups with regional and national level networking was part of a well-calculated strategy devised by the capitalist countries led by the USA for the upliftment of the rural poor in the under-developed countries of the third world and to promote their sphere of influence with the hidden objective of curbing the threat of growing influence of communism promoted by communist block of countries led by the Soviet Union. The capitalist block was worried about the widening disparities and inequalities among the people in the third world countries because of the corruption, nepotism, vested interests and wrong policies of the ruling classes and feared that such a situation may eventually lead to takeover by totalitarian regimes in many of those countries in place of the existing democratic regimes. The voluntary agency movement was devised to facilitate direct intervention of western agencies in extending aid to the most marginalised sections of people in the third world countries and also to empower them to press for urgently needed reforms in agricultural and other sectors to make them less susceptible to succumb to the designs of revolutionary movements. This new strategy of building up a voluntary agency network for the uplift of rural poor in all third world countries had the whole-hearted support of the World Bank and its other associated agencies.

In the initial stage, the guiding principle of all these voluntary groups was focused only on developmental issues. However there was a significant shift in the strategy, mode of functioning and direction of the voluntary agency movement in the country since mid-seventies with many militant voluntary groups surfacing suddenly in different parts of the country and some of the existing voluntary groups also adopting a militant line of action shifting their focus from developmental work at grass-root level to empowerment of masses through awareness campaigns and organising people's movements to resolve the various problems of the local poor.

CHANGE IN STRATEGY AND THE LATIN AMERICAN CONNECTION:

This change in strategy was the result of a deep-rooted conspiracy hatched by the sponsors of the voluntary agency movement. After establishing an effective network of voluntary action groups in different countries, in early seventies there was a rethinking among the think-tanks behind this movement for expanding and strengthening this movement to achieve greater political objectives in third world countries. They found the liberation theology movement which was fast gaining popularity in Latin American countries as an effective concept suitable for replication in countries like India to push forward their secret agenda. The pro-Marxist liberation theology movement which had originated in Latin American countries like Peru and Bolivia in late sixties had spread to some of the African and Asian countries also by early seventies. The leaders of this new radical movement while retaining their faith in Jesus Christ believed that the Marxist line of action was most suited to emancipate the vast sections of oppressed masses in the third world countries from their perpetual poverty and bondage. After establishing a chain of base communities they started organising militant people's movements by mobilising the support of under-privileged sections of people like industrial and agricultural workers, landless peasants, etc. highlighting their

various problems and demands and pressing for remedial action and urgently needed land reforms to protect the rights of landless peasants. This strategy of the radical Christian action movement started by the Latin American theologians was copied in toto by the capitalist lobby for implementation in countries like India where it was further expanded to include non-Christians as well to achieve their objectives. The adoption of the liberation theology-inspired radical action movement also gave the capitalist lobby a perfect cover to launch thousands of trained and committed Christian activists into the action group movement. This was the background that led to a sudden spurt in the emergence of a number of Christian and social action groups in India since early seventies.

The voluntary organisations that gave emphasis on organising people's movements to achieve their objectives and goals are generally termed as social action groups or non-party political formations. The social action groups can be broadly classified into three major groups as development groups, action groups and support groups.

DEVELOPMENT GROUPS.

These are non-political groups involved in developmental activities like water-shed management, enhancement of productivity in farm sector, community development, adult education, vocational training, tribal welfare, women's welfare, etc. Their avowed objective is to help the rural poor in improving their social status by promoting their upward mobility through measures that augment their income and self-reliance in basic needs like food, shelter, clothings and health services. They also help the official agencies in implementing various developmental programmes if the official efforts are not found satisfactory. Though these groups are not action-oriented, they extend their moral support to all the programmes and movements of action groups. Leaders of development groups are also sometimes found indulging in conscientisation programmes for empowering their target sections of people by educating them about their citizenship rights and the circumstances that have forced them to live in perpetual poverty and the need for putting up resistance to protect their honour and dignity.

ACTION GROUPS.

The action groups are formed on the ideology of organising people's movements to seek social and political action to bring the marginalised sections of people from the periphery to the centre of the development process. Leaders of these groups seek to educate the impoverished masses about the exploitative system which has kept them in a state of perpetual poverty and subjected them to gross human rights violations amidst the growing affluence of a minority section of people. That the adoption of the idea of organising militant people's movements to bring about a radical transformation in the status of the rural poor is a well-calculated strategy devised by the capitalist agencies is further confirmed by the fact that since mid-seventies many international funding agencies had started incorporating in their objectives the need for necessary steps to promote non-formal and adult education to bring about an awareness among the rural masses about the factors responsible for their poverty, enslavement and inhuman living conditions and to empower them to work for their liberation from the clutches of the prevailing oppressive and exploitative system.

Strategy:

Implementation of urgently needed land reforms, decentralisation of power by strengthening the panjayat raj system and empowerment of poor and other marginalised sections of people are considered as some of the top priority areas by the action groups needing their immediate attention and action. According to the action group concept, to build up a people's movement through

mobilisation of the marginalised sections of people in a particular area, it is necessary to ensure their political, economic and social empowerment. The action group leaders believe that people can attain political power only if decision making powers are vested in their hands. As per the action group philosophy, this can be achieved only by decentralisation of power and strengthening the panchayat raj system. The action group leaders therefore relentlessly campaign for strengthening the gram sabhas with more powers and demanding grant of self-rule for all indigenous communities and forest-dwellers. The hidden agenda behind this campaign for decentralisation of power is to weaken the Centre and pave the way for facilitating the growth of separatist sentiments among the local population.

The economic empowerment of the people requires their economic independence by eliminating the dependency of small farmers and daily wagers on the landlords for their daily subsistence and enabling them to earn their daily bread from the produce of their own land, livestock and wage labour. Hence the action group leaders always press for urgently needed land reforms and distribution of land to the landless. This however is a strategy cleverly devised to win over the support of local villagers.

The social empowerment requires demolition of some artificial barriers created by certain social institutions and practices like caste system, bonded labour, gender discrimination, etc. and creation of a just and harmonious society. Attack on Hindutwa movement is a hidden agenda behind this clause as the action group leaders perceive the Hindutwa forces as the patrons of the concept of superiority of upper caste sections of people, a mindset propagated as responsible for keeping the marginalised sections of people in a state of oppression and deprivation for thousands of years.

Mode of functioning

The action group leaders believe that their primary duty is to become a catalyst in activating a people's movement by taking up one or more burning issues in a particular area. However every newly established action group initially has to work as a development group focusing their attention on the development needs of the area and the local target groups like Adivasis, Dalits, agricultural workers and landless peasants in the rural areas and slum-dwellers and contract workers and other daily-wagers in urban areas. After making a thorough study of the area and the local problems, the leaders of the group gradually establish the necessary rapport with the local villagers by giving them valuable tips and guidance in tackling some of their pressing problems like shortage of drinking water, unemployment, harassment by civil or forest authorities, etc.

The action groups which are active mostly in the remote and tribal areas in the country do a lot of good work in improving the lot of the rural poor, mainly the Adivasis and Dalits, so as to win their support and confidence. The highly educated and dedicated leaders of action groups encourage adult education by conducting night classes for the illiterate villagers and also teach them the importance of maintenance of hygiene in their day to day work. They help them in setting up grain banks and credit unions and teach them water conservation methods. Since alcohol addiction is a major problem in the tribal society, they conduct special drive at regular intervals to dissuade the tribal villagers from their drinking habit. They also help the local villagers from exploitation by traders and money lenders and the womenfolk from sexual abuse by traders and government officials. Further they help the villagers in taking up their various problems and grievances like scarcity of drinking water, nonavailability of ration items, etc. with the concerned government officials and in trying to get them redressed.

Encouragement to Militancy:

After establishing a good rapport with the local villagers and winning over their confidence, the activists start exploiting the growing disillusionment of the local people with the

existing power structure and convince them about the futility of expecting justice and redressal of their grievances in the normal course under such a prejudiced, corrupt and pro-capitalist system and inject them with the venom of militancy by subjecting them to regular sessions of brain washing intended to turn them against the government and upper caste Hindus. If the villagers are Dalits, the NGO activists explain to them how the Dalits have been socially and culturally, economically and politically subjugated and exploited for thousands of years by the upper caste Hindus. They tell them how the justice is denied to them even today and they continue to be the most degraded, downtrodden and the least educated section of the society as all the positions of power are still held by the upper caste Hindus. They also point out to them how their water resources are exploited by the government by constructing dams etc. to satisfy the needs of city dwellers unmindful of the plight of the villagers who are left with no water even for drinking.

If the target group is tribal population, the activists tell them how the forest land which belonged to their ancestors was systematically taken away from them by the government rendering them as encroachers on their own land. They tell the Adivasi villagers how their sacred hills and rivers are being destroyed by the government through mining and other developmental work causing severe environmental pollution and exposing the local villagers to serious health hazards. They teach them about their citizenship rights and their inalienable right to lead a dignified life. They explain to them how the state administration and the police in collusion with traders and rich landlords had suppressed them with brutal force for all these years and kept them in perpetual bondage and poverty. They tell them the need to fight back to protect their honour and dignity and exhort them to resist the oppressive state machinery with all their might, if necessary by taking up arms, to get their legitimate rights restored and grievances redressed.

Networking Concept:

The concept of networking is an important aspect of action group movement because of the realisation among its leaders about the limitations of the individual efforts in dealing with the various problems and hurdles faced by the groups. The networking helps the action groups in sharing and disseminating information and developing their collective strength. It further helps the action groups to protect their space, role and legitimacy in case of any threat from some local vested interests and hostile groups or harassment and intimidation from some government agencies. The combined might gained through such networking also helps them to act as a pressure group to influence the policies and decisions of the government on various issues taken up by them.

Components of action groups:

Radical church activists inspired by Liberation Theology, naxal activists who were disillusioned with the ever-splitting and disintegrating naxal groups, some leaders and activists associated with the Sarvodaya movement and Gandhi Peace Foundation who were closely associated with the total revolution launched by Jayaprakash Narayan in the seventies formed the core group of the action group movement in the initial stage. However the young and radical social activists churned out by various social science institutes in the country like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Nirmala Niketan of Mumbai constitute the majority component of action group volunteers today.

SUPPORT GROUPS:

The support groups play a very important role in sustaining and strengthening the action group movement. These groups are formed to harness support for the various issues taken up by the action groups at micro level and also the broader national issues and subjects like denial of social justice, caste, class and gender discrimination, indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, environmental pollution, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and incidents of

human rights violations. The members of support groups are highly educated intellectuals and professionals like lawyers, retired judges, writers, artists, servicemen, electronic and print media personnel and social and human rights activists. The aim of these groups is to mobilise the support of intellectual class in different professions and fields and use them as pressure group to exert influence on the government for favourable action over certain issues taken up by the action groups or to carry out motivated propaganda campaign in furtherance of the action group agenda. The leaders of these groups generally don't take part in micro level people's movements organised by action groups and instead prefer to address public meetings and press conferences or attend seminars and workshops in support of the issues taken up by the action groups. They also undertake propaganda tours outside the country to mobilise support of like minded groups and agencies abroad for the various issues taken up by the action groups in India. Some of the prominent support groups in India include lawyers outfits like Alternative Law Forum, Lawyer's Collective, Human Rights Law Network and Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights (IPT), Human Rights Groups like People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and People's Union for Democratic Rights, Coordination Committees of action groups like National Alliance of People's Movement and Bharat Jan Andolan and Research and Documentation Centres like Indian Social Institutes (New Delhi/Bangalore) and Bombay Urban Industrial League BUILD (Mumbai). Some of the prominent support group leaders includes judge activists like S. B. Sawant (Retired S.C. Judge), Hosbet Suresh, S. M. Daud (Retired H.C. Judges), Lawyer activists like Collin Gonsalves and Prashant Bhusan. Human Rights Activists like P. A. Sebastin and Kannabhiran, Christian activists like Fr. Prakash Louis and Walter Fernandez and social activists like Medha Patkar, B. D. Sharma and Pradip Prabhu.

Aims and Objectives of Action/Support Groups.

1) To stop or delay all big devel

As a matter of policy, the action groups are opposed to all developmental projects like big dams, sea-ports, airports, power projects, mining projects, cement and steel plants in different parts of the country, especially in remote and interior areas. As soon as a major project is sanctioned, the action group activists in the area in consultation with state and national level leaders start a misinformation campaign among the local villagers about the adverse effect of the project like environmental pollution, health hazards, displacement of people, loss of livelihood, etc. and mobilise their support for organising a resistance movement against the project. They even advocate armed resistance by the local villagers, mostly Adivasis and Dalits, and motivate them to resort to physical violence to stop the project by attacking the project or survey officials with their traditional weapons like bow and arrows, axes, spears etc. They often succeed in stopping the project indefinitely or at least delaying it for a long duration causing enormous cost escalation and creating hurdles against the economic progress of the country. Besides stalling the economic progress of the country there are some other objectives also behind this anti-development agenda of the action groups. All such groups are most active in the interior rural and tribal areas where the poor and illiterate local villagers are regularly subjected to conscientization programme by the action group activists who in the name of empowerment actually preach militancy to the villagers. The Christian missionaries are also very active in such areas with their proselytisation work. The development projects bring economic progress and urbanisation of the area and both the action group leaders and church activists resent and oppose such projects as economic prosperity will make the rural poor less susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by action group and church activists. These activists also want to preserve the privacy and space they need to carry on with their nefarious activities.

The activists and leaders of action group movement not only give their whole-hearted support to the naxalite movement, but keep close links with leaders of various naxalite outfits. They are also sympathetic to all anti-national movements in the country like the various insurgent

groups in the North-East, separatist movement in Kashmir, Khalistan movement in Punjab, LTTE in Tamil Nadu, Islamic terrorism and Dalit and Adivasi militancy in the country.

They always try to project how the minorities in India are harassed and discriminated against by the government in different ways and conduct regular campaigns against all alleged cases of harassment and atrocities against Christians and Muslims in India by the fascist and fanatic Hindus. Such campaigns are carried out in a manner which could cause disaffection among the minorities in India. The action groups used to take a leading role in organising protest programmes against the atrocities on minorities in different parts of the country like the Gujarat riots, attacks on Christian missionaries, etc.

They also exaggerate all cases of atrocities against the Dalits and project the same as gross human rights violations of the Dalits by the upper caste people with the sole objective of creating a wedge between the Dalits and upper caste Hindus.

The action group leaders always try to instill an anti-establishment feeling among the local villagers by projecting all officials belonging to various government departments like civil administration, civil supply, police, forest, etc. as enemies of the poor and accusing them of deliberately being indifferent to all the problems and grievances of the villagers.

Some of the activists, especially those belonging to Christian action groups, take special care in convincing the local Dalit and Adivasi villagers that the Dalits and Adivasis who have been suppressed and subjugated by the upper caste Hindus for thousands of years are the original inhabitants of India and the Hindus as settlers from outside. They further tell the local villagers that the Hindu leaders who describe Christianity and Islam as alien cultures have no moral right to make such pronouncements as Hinduism is as alien to India as Islam and Christianity. Spreading such concocted stories is part of a sinister campaign by the activists to convince the Dalits and Adivasis that they have never been a part of Hinduism and to create an anti-Hindu feeling among them.

Leaders of these radical action groups from the beginning had assumed an ultra-leftist political posture projecting their movement as a revolt against the existing corrupt and unprincipled political parties, their front organisations and bureaucratic structures. The ultra-leftist posture of these groups had initially created some confusion among the supporters of established leftist political parties. The early entrants to this movement were mostly activists inspired by either Marxist ideology or Gandhian thoughts or pro-Marxist liberation theology movement of Latin America. One important aspect of this action group movement is that despite their proclaimed leftist credentials these groups had always tried to project the ineffectiveness of the traditional left parties in protecting the interests of the poor and downtrodden indicating their aversion for the traditional left movement in the country. In the recent anti-SEZ agitation in Nandigram, West Bengal, these groups had openly aligned with some naxalite and Muslim fundamentalist groups to oppose the CPM-led government of West Bengal which clearly shows their antipathy towards the genuine left movement. The fact that these radical groups continue to get liberal donations from many Western and European agencies and also from some international church agencies further exposes their real nature and intentions.

Creation of secret cells/lobbies among the bureaucrats including IAS, IFS and IPS officials and use them as pressure groups to get favourable decisions from the government on issues taken up by the action groups and also for getting the nominees of action/support groups inducted into various government bodies and committees in furtherance of the action group agenda. Inclusion of NGO activists like Pradip Prabhu, B.D. Sharma, retired H.C. Judges Hosbet Suresh and Rajinder Sachar and social activist Madhu Sarin in important government committees, both at the Centre and in states, has been engineered as part of this strategy.

Floating of activist forums of senior advocates,retired judges of supreme court and high courts,writers,academics,artistes,human rights and environmentalists to mobilise support for the agitational programmes conducted or issues taken up by the action groups. Most of the human rights and environmental groups,lawyers forums,activist groups of writers,academics, theatre and media personnel,etc. in the country are formed as per this strategy.

Conducting meetings,seminars,press conferences,protest programmes and media campaign both within India and outside against human rights violations by the security forces in Kashmir,North-Eastern states and other parts of the country. Extensive campaign carried out by NGO activists against those responsible for the Gujarat riots and security personnel involved in alleged fake encounter killings of suspected terrorists and innocent civilians formed part of this strategy. It was in accordance with this strategy, Justice Hosbet Suresh,a member of the Concerned Citizen's Tribunal which had conducted an independent inquiry into the Gujarat riots,had undertaken a tour to the UK in May, 2003 to address a meeting of scholars and human rights activists about the unsafe future of minorities in India in the backdrop of the Gujarat riots. During this tour, an interview given by Justice Hosbet Suresh to Professor Richard Bonney of University of Leicester describing the Gujarat riots as a state-organised crime with the active participation of VHP, BJP and Bajrang Dal activists including some state ministers had drawn considerable media attention abroad.

Conducting independent inquiries into incidents of communal riots, atrocities on Dalits,alleged fake encounter killings by security forces,etc. by specially constituted fact finding teams comprising of retired judges and human rights activists with the avowed objective of bringing out the real facts. The independent inquiry conducted by the Concerned Citizen's Tribunal led by V.K.Krishna Iyer,retired judge of Supreme Court, into the Gujarat riots and another independent inquiry by a fact finding team led by B.G.Kolse Patil,retired judge of Mumbai High Court,into the encounter killing of suspected Pakistani terrorists near the RSS Hqrs.on June 1,2006 were thus carried out in accordance with this strategy.

Creation of secret cells among the sitting judges of Supreme Court and High Courts with the help of retired judges and lawyer activists of the support groups for influencing the judiciary in getting favourable judgements in cases of action group interest. Such cells are also used for getting the nominees of action/support groups appointed to head various inquiry/judicial commissions formed to probe into incidents and cases in which the action groups have a stake.

Organising retired defence personnel to build up friendship and peace initiative with Pakistan and pave the way for resolving all outstanding issues with Pakistan,including Kashmir in an amicable manner. The Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy founded in 1994 and India-Pakistan Soldiers Initiative for Peace (IPSIP) founded in 1999 were established in accordance with this strategy.These organisations preach demilitarisation, denuclearisation and peace and seek a peaceful democratic solution to the Kashmir dispute.

Creation of secret cells among serving defence personnel with the intention of promoting indiscipline and disaffection among our armed forces personnel. The increasing incidents of indiscipline among the armed forces personnel like insubordination, fragging and the recent rebellion among a section of Assam Rifles personnel against army officers on deputation to Assam Rifles,etc. are suspected to be the handiwork of such cells.

All action groups are totally opposed to stringent laws like TADA, POTA and AFSPA meant to curb terrorist activities in the country dubbing the same as draconian legislations which are often misused by the security forces to terrorise and torture innocent people. Action group leaders were in the forefront in opposing legislations like TADA and POTA and getting them abolished

and they are now demanding the withdrawal of Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) which is being effectively used by the security forces to curb secessionist and terrorist activities in North-Eastern states and Kashmir.

Action group leaders are highly critical of India's nuclear policy. They want India to sign the NPT and become a non-nuclear power. They point out that the nuclear weapons can never be used and it is a wastage of money and manpower to develop such weapons. They further feel that it is against our national ethos to develop such weapons of mass destruction. They are also opposed to India opting for nuclear energy to meet our power requirements pointing out that it is both costly and risky. As part of this anti-nuclear agenda, they oppose the uranium mining at all the mining centres in India and even incite the local tribals/villagers to put up violent resistance against uranium mining on the grounds of environmental pollution and health hazards posed to the local villagers.

Documentation and Research Centres:

A network of well-established documentation and research centres is an important ingredient of action group movement. These documentation centres collect information about the activities and struggles of various action groups, disseminate all information and developments pertaining to action group movement to individual action groups in the area, bring out analytical papers on all important social, political and economic developments and issues taken up and struggles conducted by the action groups in the area and send copies of all such processed and documented materials to the funding agencies and other interested and friendly groups abroad. Most of these documentation centres in the country are located in Mumbai, Bangalore and New Delhi. Some of the most prominent documentation centres include Indian Social Institutes Centres in Delhi and Bangalore, Bombay Urban Industrial League (BUILD) in Mumbai, Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD) New Delhi, The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore and Lokayan in New Delhi.

Besides the documentation centres, every action group also has to submit a detailed report about its chosen field of activity, a background history of the local population with details like religion and caste composition, their economic status, local problems, disputes, and grievances and the issues that could be taken up to activate people's movements, etc. to the donor agencies. It also has to send regular progress reports about the work carried out, people's response to the movement and the hurdles faced, if any, to the funding agencies. Such reports are so elaborate that it will give a clear picture about all agricultural, industrial and developmental activities, socio-economic status and problems of the people and prevailing tensions, disputes and anti-establishment feeling among the people, etc. in the area to the donor agencies. Such detailed information catered to various funding agencies by the NGOs and documentation centres can have grave security implications for the country as the enormous data and intelligence thus collected by countries like USA through various Foundations and Funding Agencies enable them to keep a close tab on all socio-economic and political activities including areas of tension and conflict in the country. This valuable data base is used by the capitalist agencies for appropriate policy planning and sinister intelligence operations to achieve their strategic goals in India.